

Report reveals wide social division in UK higher education

Barry Mason
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A report issued by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) showed “deep, broad and persistent inequality” in the participation of 18- and 19-year-olds in higher education, according to its author, Mark Corver.

The study looked at the participation rate in higher education over the period 1994 to 2000. This period covers the first three years of the Blair-led Labour government. It showed a difference in participation rate between regions. In London, for example, the rate in 2000 was 36 percent—up 6 percent on the 1994 figure—whilst that of the North East was 24 percent in 2000 and had changed very little from 1994.

However, there were also stark differences within regions, between districts or cities. The data was analysed on the basis of local authority ward boundaries and so was able to track the differing participation rates in conjunction with other social indices.

The city of Sheffield was one of the most extreme examples. In the Hallam constituency, the participation rate is 61 percent, whilst in Brightside—former Home Secretary David Blunkett’s constituency—the rate is 6 percent. Hallam is said to have the highest concentration of millionaires outside London, while Brightside has a large number of local authority housing estates. Paul White, professor of urban geography at Sheffield, told the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, “The divide goes back 100 years to when owners of cutlery factories and engineering works settled in south-west Sheffield, while social housing estates were built in the east.”

Bristol is another city showing stark differences between constituencies. Bristol West, which includes the select Clifton area, has a participation rate of more than 50 percent. It has a high concentration of

independent schools, and many of its residents are professionals. Across the river in Bristol South, the participation rate is 10 percent. This area has over 40 percent local authority housing, more than 50 percent of its inhabitants have no formal qualifications and only 6 percent of the inhabitants have degrees.

The Hefce report stated that young people living in low participation areas suffer other disadvantages. “Children in low participation areas are likely to be living in local authority rented homes in some of England’s most deprived wards with...less space and fewer household goods than their peers in high participation areas...often their nearest secondary school will have only a small proportion of its pupils gaining 5 GCSE [general school leaving certificate] A-C grades. In contrast, children in high participation areas are frequently near schools, often fee-paying where very nearly all the pupils gain these grades. Adults in low participation areas are likely to work in a manual occupation, have a low income, to receive means-tested benefits and not have...a car or an overseas holiday...the two groups differ sharply across wide range of measures of political, cultural and consumption behaviour.”

The survey also showed differences in subjects studied. Twenty-one percent of young people from low participation areas associated with disadvantage are more likely to choose subjects with a more vocational bias such as computer studies, nursing or education, as opposed to 16 percent from high participation areas. Eighteen percent of young people from high participation areas enrolled for languages or humanities as opposed to 11 percent from low participation areas.

Other research amplifies the Hefce results. Research carried out by the educational charity, the Sutton Trust, shows that young people from state schools and sixth-

form colleges are under-represented at the top 13 universities even though they would be eligible. According to the trust, 3,000 young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have the necessary level of qualifications to enter these top universities but do not enroll.

Young people from lower participation areas tend to study nearer home than those from the more advantaged areas. They are 25 percent more likely to attend a college or university within a 30-minute car ride of home and 34 percent more likely to live at home whilst studying.

Penny Jane Burke, lecturer in higher education at the University of London, told the *Times Higher Education Supplement* that students from lower socioeconomic groups “tend not to choose more prestigious universities where they risk ‘not fitting in’ and being a minority and where they would have to travel to unfamiliar areas outside of their local communities.”

Students’ possibility of finishing their course also varies widely. Whilst overall around 29 percent of young people enter higher education, the figure for those actually gaining a qualification is 25 percent. Young men have a higher dropout rate than women, but the most marked difference relates to socioeconomic background. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds have a 66 percent higher dropout rate than those from the most advantaged backgrounds.

The Labour government has a target of 50 percent of young people going on to higher education. Since 50 percent of 16-year-olds achieve 5 GCSEs and are therefore qualified to go on to study A Levels at sixth form, this is a rather modest goal. The fact that only 29 percent of young people actually get a higher education after Labour has been in power for two terms points to the fact that the government has presided over an increasingly unequal society and that young people’s life chances, even their hopes and expectations, are determined by class.



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